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ABSTRACT

Widespread and rapid changes in society, leading to knowledge and skill obsolescence, have provided impetus for the concept of lifelong education. Learning is not confined to a particular period of life or to formal educational institutions, but is a set of attitudes and skills to be used throughout life and in a wide variety of situations. As such, lifelong learning is distinct from traditional notions of adult education, or even recurrent and continuing education. Although the bulk of learning takes place outside the school, it is in the formal educational institutions that the skills and attitudes essential for effective self-directed learning are first introduced. Since social and economic pressures will continue to bring large numbers of students into the college and university system, it is important to insure that higher education is responsive to new lifelong learning needs. This is perhaps best done by working through existing university teachers and encouraging innovations that place the emphasis on student-centered learning with real life problems, as opposed to traditional, didactic instruction. Instructional developers could play a key role by encouraging research on the relationship between different learning approaches and their relevance to students' needs in the world of work. (Author/YLB)

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LIFELONG LEARNING AND HIGHER EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Widespread and rapid changes in society, leading to the obsolescence of knowledge and skills, have provided impetus for the concept of lifelong education. This implies that learning is not confined to a particular period of life or to formal educational institutions, but rather is a set of attitudes and skills that will be used throughout life and in a wide variety of situations. As such, lifelong learning is distinct from traditional notions of adult education, or even recurrent and continuing education. Although the bulk of learning takes place outside the school, it is in the formal educational institutions that the skills and attitudes essential for effective self-directed learning are first introduced. Since social and economic pressures will continue to bring large numbers of students into the college and university system, it is important to insure that higher education is responsive to new lifelong learning needs. It is argued that this is best done by working through existing university teachers and encouraging innovations that place the emphasis on student centred learning with real life problems, as opposed to traditional, didactic instruction. In this regard, instructional developers could play a key role, not least by encouraging research on the relationship between different learning approaches and their relevance to students' needs in the world of work.

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The Concept of Lifelong Learning

Many educators have commented that we live in a time of increasingly widespread, comprehensive, and rapid change (e.g. Kaufmann, 1976; Wall, 1975). Change of this sort has important consequences for education in that it frequently leads to the obsolescence of knowledge and skills, implying that systematic learning can no longer be confined to the years of childhood and young adulthood. This has aroused an interest in the concept of "lifelong education" — the notion that people have learning needs and experiences throughout their lives.

Although lifelong learning has become a ubiquitous catch-phrase among educators, the term is deceptively simple, and indeed there is considerable misunderstanding and disagreement about how the concept may be precisely defined, and about the implications of such definitions for the formal educational system. Many educators have embraced the notion of lifelong learning with great eagerness. For example, in the field of higher education lifelong learning has been seen by some as an answer to the current financial crisis faced by universities and colleges throughout the Western nations. The great expectations for lifelong learning on the part of many in higher education are well encapsulated in the title of a monograph issued by the American Association of Higher Education, entitled "Lifelong learners: A new clientele for higher education" (Vermilye, 1974). Along these lines, the State University of New York, in major newspaper advertisements directed to the general public, has recently talked about its activities in terms of "the lifelong experience". What appears to be meant here is simply the opportunity

for non-traditional students to avail themselves of university courses -- in other words lifelong learning is seen as almost synonymous with "adult education". Others have confused lifelong learning with what is better termed "recurrent education", in which retraining and upgrading of qualifications takes place at various points throughout an individual's career instead of being confined to one block of time immediately before career entry.

These conceptions of lifelong learning seem unduly restrictive and misguided, primarily because they imply that such learning can only take place through a process of "lifelong schooling" -- ignoring the fairly obvious fact that a great deal of essential learning takes place outside the formal educational system, for example in the home or at work. The present authors argue that, in a sense, learning is far too important to be left solely to professional educators in direct teaching situations. Rather, educators would be better employed devising some means to foster self-directed learning and help it to take place productively and efficiently. Cropley (1978) has suggested a set of appropriate goals for such learning. He suggests that the lifelong learner: (1) should be strongly aware of the relationship between learning and real life; (2) should be aware of the need for lifelong learning; (3) should be highly motivated to carry on a process of lifelong learning; (4) should possess a self-concept favourable to lifelong learning; and (5) should possess the necessary skills for lifelong learning. These skills include the ability to (a) set personal objectives in a realistic way; (b) apply existing knowledge in an effective manner; (c) evaluate one's own learning efficiently; (d) locate information when it becomes apparent that there is a need to do so; (e) use different and effective learning strategies in appropriate settings (in groups or alone, with or without a teacher, and so on); and (f) employ a variety of different learning tools, ranging from libraries to the media.

The Role of Educational Institutions

It might be argued that to achieve these goals it would be better if students avoided traditional educational institutions, such as schools and colleges, since the latter are so wedded to formal notions of instruction. In practice, it seems unlikely that the idea of a "de-schooled" society as advocated by Illich (1971) will be realized in practice, even if such an approach were theoretically sound. In the case of higher education, it seems likely that, despite some evidence of declining participation rates in North America in the past decade, and some tendency for students to delay entry into the formal educational system, there are still many good reasons why large numbers of students will continue to seek college degrees in the three or four years after leaving high school. For instance, there are considerable social and economic pressures to earn conventional educational qualifications, giving rise to real or perceived needs to earn a basic initial training for job entry. While there has been some shift away from a total reliance by universities and colleges on students in the 18-21 age bracket, caused by open admission policies for mature students, such changes only serve to reinforce the general indentification of university level education with the earning of a formal, and fairly conventional, baccalaureate degree.

If it is accepted that this pattern is unlikely to change radically in the immediate future, then it seems sensible to work with the existing system of higher education to try to make it more responsive to new lifelong learning needs. This could be done by attempting to foster student characteristics needed for lifelong learning, encompassing knowledge, skills, motivation, and attitudes.

Strategies for Lifelong Education

In practical terms, just how will this be accomplished? In the case of the school system, Cropley (1978) has argued that an important element in the promotion of lifelong education is the appropriate training of teachers. In the case of higher education, however, formal teacher training is virtually non-existent. Although there are some signs that induction courses for new teachers may be required in the future (e.g. in the British polytechnic system), in the long run this may be counter-productive from the point of view of encouraging the development of lifelong learning skills. This is because the establishment of an official "course" in pedagogy may well reinforce the notion that learning comes primarily from exposure to a fixed body of content, transmitted through conventional didactic methods -- in contrast to the experiential approach that is more appropriate to the concept of lifelong learning. In other words, the way to promote understanding of lifelong learning is probably not to organize a series of lectures on what Cropley (1978) calls the "content" (as opposed to the process) of lifelong education: to do so would be to institutionalize a type of learning that should not be confined to any particular formal educational setting. As an alternative to the formal course of training for teachers in higher education, it might be desirable to approach the topic of lifelong learning by exposing teachers to different learning approaches that they can experience for themselves in realistic situations. This "workshop" approach has in fact been a major tool of the instructional development movement in North America, and is discussed further below.

A great deal of instruction in contemporary higher education takes place through the traditional expository technique of the lecture. Furthermore, it is probable that the most usual "experiential" type of learning for many university students is the science laboratory exercise, where the setting is

often artifical and the principal goal is confined to obtaining the right answer. Undue reliance on the conventional lecture and laboratory is not particularly conducive to promotion of lifelong learning skills as defined above. Rather, there is a need to move teaching methods in higher education away from didactic and teacher-based approaches to more realistic and student-centred methods to achieve what Cropley (1978) calls the "horizontal integration" of learning with the many other aspects of life outside the educational institution itself.

This could be achieved in a number of ways. For example, students might themselves serve as learning resources to supplement knowledge gained from the teacher or the university library. Team work and project work, involving student research on open-ended problems, might be encouraged. Students could be allowed to have some input into the learning objectives for the course, and could subsequently take part in deciding how well these objectives have been fulfilled -- both by the mechanism of evaluating the course and evaluating themselves and their colleagues, rather than having these tasks performed solely by the instructor.

To insure that the learning process in the classroom is transferable to learning outside, evaluation should be continuous and on-going to provide students with the opportunity to change and improve their performance. Successful performance on some practical predetermined criterion would also be a more accurate reflection of real world evaluation than the norm-based grading practices so frequently found in contemporary colleges and universities. Other approaches might include the use of different learning media (as opposed to exclusive reliance on the spoken and printed word), use of outside resource people as teachers, and the introduction of learning contracts between individual students and the instructor.

In fact all these approaches are already being used in higher education to some extent. At the University of Waterloo, for example, undergraduate students in Management Science learn problem solving by working with real life clients from the local business community. Furthermore the entire Waterloo Engineering Faculty, and much of the rest of the University, operates on a system of co-operative education, whereby students spend two of the six years of their undergraduate degree in a work setting related to their academic programme. The job placements, all of which are paid positions, are carefully selected by the students and an advisor, and the University maintains contact with students while they are in outside employment. Each student must submit a report on his work term which is assessed both by the University faculty and the employer.

Another interesting approach that has been successfully used in a university setting is to have the faculty and students learn together in an area where neither are experts. This was the basis of the University of Keele's "Foundation Year" in which small groups of faculty and students explored topics that lay outside the faculty member's own expertise.

Lifelong Learning in Higher Education: Prospects for the Future

It seems likely that a good many university faculty would agree with the basic notion of lifelong learning as described here, even if their own teaching activities do less than desirable to encourage such learning in practice. What are the prospects for change in the future? The response to this question will be affected by both positive and negative factors at work in institutions of higher education that may affect their ability to promote lifelong learning skills.

Limiting factors include the undue reliance on traditional didactic teaching methods described above. In addition, it should be remembered that many institutions of higher education, notably universities, have multiple roles, including the encouragement of scholarship and basic research, and that such functions may impose limitations on the time and energy that faculty are willing to invest in some of the innovative approaches mentioned above. It is also possible that the role of "university teacher as expert" carries with it attitudes towards the teaching process that are not particularly conducive to lifelong learning. A further possible limitation on teaching innovation and change may lie in the traditional notion of academic freedom, whereby the instructor is seen as the principal -- if not the sole -- arbitor of teaching content and method.

Yet another restriction in many higher education establishments, especially in North America, has to do with the administrative structure within which teaching takes place. Although certain changes have taken place in this respect -- for example the offering of instruction outside the normal day-time hours and in a variety of off-campus locations -- the idea that knowledge is best communicated in uniform segments of three or four hours of instruction per week for thirteen or so weeks remains virtually sacrosanct, and will be very hard to change. Apparently equally sacred is the North American grading system whereby students are evaluated at least eight times a year (discounting mid-term examinations, term papers, and so on), for three or four years to achieve a grade point average that is frequently calculated to within two decimal places. A final factor working against the successful promotion of lifelong skills in higher education concerns the point made by Cropley (1978) that lifelong learning skills need to be promoted extensively in the elementary

and secondary school system and, if this is not done, then it will be extremely difficult to change learning skills and attitudes at the college and university level.

On the positive side, it has been noted that many of the approaches to learning that might encourage lifelong learning skills already form part of instruction in higher education, and indeed many of the innovative techniques described above were developed by teachers in colleges and universities. Furthermore, if there is truth in Cropley and Dave's (1978) contention that effective teachers should be lifelong learners themselves, then the instructor in higher education is very fortunately placed, since continuing to learn throughout a career is generally thought to be a characteristic -- if not a job requirement -- of the effective university instructor.

A final source for hope may lie in the growth of the instructional development movement in higher education, which has taken root in a large number of countries throughout the developed world. Although there is little hard evidence about the effects of instructional development activities on the type and quality of student learning, the existence of instructional development units offers a source of influence and expertise on various methods and approaches that might be used to stimulate lifelong learning in higher education.

Given the traditional respect payed to the importance of academic scholarship, it seems plausible that efforts to promote lifelong learning (and, for that matter, instructional development) would be greatly enhanced by some competent research in the field. For instance, there is surprisingly little known about the present learning skills and attitudes of college students, and how these relate to different teaching approaches within the educational system. There is not even very firm evidence on the attitudes to learning held by teachers themselves. What would seem to be required is longitudinal study

to follow groups of students throughout their educational and work lives in an attempt to determine which skills taught in school and university are most relevant to the real world experiences of learners.

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